

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 1, 2013

"Don't Eat Humble Pie."

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Coach Shug Jordan at Auburn University asked his former Linebacker Mike Kollin, who was then playing for the Miami Dolphins, if he would help his alma mater do some recruiting.

Mike said, "Sure coach, what kind of player are you looking for?" The coach said, "Well Mike, you know there's that fellow, you knock him down, he just stays down?" Mike said, "We don't want him, do we, coach?"

"No, that's right. Then there's that fellow, you knock him down and he gets up, you knock him down again and he stays down." Mike said, "We don't want him either do we coach?" Coach said, "No, but Mike there's a fellow, you knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up."

Mike answered, "That's the guy we want isn't it, coach?" The coach answered, "No, Mike, we don't want him either. I want you to find the guy who's knocking everybody down. That's the guy we want."

That's the guy we want to be seen with! That we want to invite to our dinners and social gatherings because it is the kind of people we want to be. We don't want to be seen with the guys who are always being knocked down--the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. But these are the people, as we soon shall see, that we are encouraged to associate with.

Look with me as we examine Jesus' story about a party. As the guests arrive they are quickly grabbing the front row seats--the places of honor. Assuming they are the most important guests, they will soon be embarrassed, Jesus says, by someone more distinguished. They will be asked to get up and move to the end of the table. They will be dishonored before all.

How do we avoid humiliation? How do we stay humble in this world? There are two things we must do.

First, let's not put ourselves in a position to eat humble pie. It is the ruin of the church and it is the ruin of most businesses. We want to be seen as more important than the other guy.

Jesus encountered it at a dinner after church. Remember the scene with me. After synagogue services Jesus attends a dinner at a man's house who is known throughout the community as an upstanding Pharisee. As he arrives he is being watched. He has stirred up controversy before; might he do something to raise suspicions here at the dinner? Not wishing to disappoint the private eyes, he poses a question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" No one said a word.

You may remember that in Luke 13, Jesus has already answered that question. It is legal to heal on the Sabbath because people are more important than rules. But, Jesus wants to press the issue once again. So at this dinner party he singles out a man, sitting right in front of him, who is suffering from dropsy and heals him on the spot. This, to the owner of the home, is an insult. Jesus broke a commandment in the home of distinguished Pharisee. I can imagine the atmosphere from then on was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

It is interesting to note that neither this man nor the hunchbacked woman asked to be healed. The point here is not the healing; the point is that people must take precedent over rules. Just then the momentum shifts, dinner is served, and it is time to grab a seat.

You would think Jesus would leave well enough alone. But noticing the mad scramble to grab the seats closest to the host, the places of honor, he gives two pieces of advice. The first is given to the guest. When you are invited to a wedding, he says, and it comes time for dinner, don't take the places of honor. Otherwise someone more important will arrive late and you will be asked to

move down. Take a seat at the end of the table and the host will move you up. Therefore, you will be honored before all.

I like the story historians tell about the funeral of Charlemagne. We called him "Karl der Grosse" (Charles the Great). Charlemagne was the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages. After his death a mighty funeral procession left his castle for the cathedral at Aix (Aachen). When the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop, who barred the cathedral door. "Who comes?" the bishop asked, as was the custom. "Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire," proclaimed the Emperor's proud herald. "Him I know not," the bishop replied. "Who comes?" The herald, a bit shaken, replied, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth." "Him I know not," the bishop said again. "Who comes?" The herald, now completely crushed, responded, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ." To which the bishop, Christ's representative, responded, "Enter! receive Christ's gift of life!" Even Charlemagne in all his glory and good works could not assume the position of honor. I am convinced that the more honor is due us the more we should resist it. Does that mean we shouldn't be proud of our accomplishments? Not at all. But we should not seek the accolades that come with success. The book of Proverbs has a terse reminder for us all: Pride comes before a fall.

So, how do you stay humble in a haughty world? First, don't seek honor for yourself and second, expect to be honored only in the life to come.

This is Jesus' second piece of advice and it is given to the Pharisee, the man hosting the party. Don't throw dinner parties for your friends, your family, and rich neighbors because they will invite you to their table and you will have your reward; rather, says Jesus, throw dinner parties for the poor and the lame. They will not be able to pay you back. You will be paid back at the time of the resurrection.

What is Jesus' point? Is he saying we are not to throw parties for our friends? No, that's not what he is driving at. The meaning here is this: Kindness to people who can repay us in kind is not charity. I do for you and then you owe me and I'll collect later cannot be regarded as pure love by truly religious people. Pleasing God means helping those who have absolutely no way of paying us back.

Mother Teresa was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?" She thought about the question and gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts." I think Mother Teresa would point to this story in Luke to justify that response. Jesus is saying in essence, don't do things that bring you the honor of men, do things for which God will honor you.

Thomas Carlyle, the British historian, put it like this, "Show me the man you honor and I will know what kind of man you are."

Why are we Christians asked to take seats of least honor? Why are we Christians asked to give expecting nothing in return. The table set before us today is a reminder of why we are asked to behave in this way. This table reminds us that Jesus did not choose a palace but a stable in which to be born. He did not choose the priesthood but carpentry as his profession. He did not choose world leaders but world losers, to develop his plan. He did not choose a throne but a cross from which to govern.

What is your choice? The places of honor at this Table are not open. In fact, they don't even really exist. There are seats open to every poor sinner and unrighteous cripple willing to humble themselves before their host, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.